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Helms Briefed Postal Chief on CIA's Letter Openings

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Former CIA Director Richard Helms personally showed "a few selected examples" of the product of the CIA's mail-opening operation to then-Postmaster General Winton M. Blount, according to a CIA document released by the Senate intelligence committee.

The June 3, 1971, memo said: "Mr. Helms showed the postmaster general a few selected examples of the operation's product, including an item relating to Eldridge Cleaver, which attracted the PMG's special interest."

Several lines of the memo immediately after that sentence were blocked out before the document, marked Secret/Eyes Only, was released to the press. They may have contained further remarks about Cleaver, the militant black leader.

The memo said Helms briefed then-Atty. Gen. John M. Mitchell on the mail-opening operation on

June 1 and that Mitchell "fully concurred in the value of the operation and had no 'hangups' concerning it."

HELMS MET the next day with Blount, at Mitchell's suggestion, the memo said.

"Mr. Blount's reaction, too, was entirely positive regarding the operation and its continuation," the memo said. "He opined that 'nothing needed to be done,' and rejected a momentarily held thought of his to have someone review the legality of the operation as such a review would, of necessity, widen the circle of witting persons."

Helms is scheduled to testify this afternoon and is sure to be asked why he had personally supported the operation — code-named HTLINGUAL — even though other officials of the CIA had long felt it was clearly illegal and of dubious value as a source of intelligence.

Between 1953 and 1973, when the operation was

stopped, the committee was told, a CIA office in New York filmed the envelopes of 2,705,726 letters and opened 215,320 of them. The largest single recipient of information from the intercepted mail — 57,846 items — was the FBI.

Howard Osborn, former director of security for the agency, told the committee his office was responsible for running the New York operation, but he said he did it for another CIA division.

"IT WAS their Cadillac. They built it, they drove it. My job was to maintain it, to change the oil," he explained and then added, a few minutes later: "The maintenance was very good. The product was worthless."

He was asked how the letters, diverted from the stream of mail between this country and the Soviet Union, were opened, but he said he had never seen one actually opened and, in fact, had only seen one

intercepted letter.

"I can only assume they used steam and other sophisticated devices," he responded.

Three other CIA officials told the committee they had looked into the mail-opening operation in 1960 and again in 1969 and, in both instances, concluded that it was illegal, that it was not producing much useful information for the CIA (although the FBI said it considered the information valuable) and recommended that it be reviewed or terminated.

Osborn, who was still active in the agency until early last year, said the decision to cut off the mail opening operation in 1973 came as a result of the Watergate atmosphere.

"IT CAME very forcefully to our attention that people in government shouldn't do things that are illegal," he said.

The committee went on with yesterday's hearings despite an unusually strong complaint by CIA Director William Colby Monday night in a speech to the Navy League in New York.

"We are about to have our fifth rerun of the great mail-reading story," he declared, and asked, "is our intelligence to become mere theater?"

"Will it be exposed in successive sensational reruns for the amusement, or even amazement, of our people rather than being preserved and protected for the benefit of us all?" he asked. "Will we have publicity or protection? Will we have sensation or safety?"

When Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, the committee chairman, was asked about Colby's comments after yesterday's hearing, he said Colby "is simply way off base" in suggesting that the hearings were a mere rerun of old information.

"I'M NOT surprised Mr. Colby feels pressed. . . I don't blame him for spouting off," Church said. "Mr. Colby is the first director who's had to make an accounting. It is very exasperating for him. We won't let a smokescreen deter us."

But when a reporter asked if he was accusing Colby of deliberately trying to create a smokescreen he